

A Provocation piece

RECOGNITION DEFICIT AND STRUGGLE FOR UNIFYING CITY FRAGMENTS.

Over the years we have been deeply concerned about the abuse, misuse and destruction of natural areas. We have been equally concerned about the systematic dismantling of the community and collective fabric. As a result, most cities across the world have been split into disparate and conflicting fragments. Sadly, most governments and ruling elite continuously work towards dismantling these fabrics of unity, sustainability and justice. Such efforts by them are clearly reflected in the various policies and programs that, in most instances, are undermining larger public interest, including stifling peoples voices and their participation in decision-making and active governance.

At the core of such mind-set of governments and the ruling elite, are a host of selective and discriminatory recognition policies and programs. Recognition or the lack of it, of people and nature is an obsession for the sole objective of building stronger market-forces that dictate the terms of development and principles of governance. To challenge this dominant phenomenon is a tough battle for those people who are committed to the many struggles for achievement of social and environmental equity and justice.

In Indian cities for example, a majority of the people comprising of poor and lower-middle classes are constantly denied recognition on multiple grounds, to an extent that their right to live itself is often questioned. They are denied access to land, housing, food, water, sanitation, health care, education and transport - to name just a few. This situation may be explained in another way: high pricing or un-affordability of all the above basic needs and services are a way by which most people are denied access, thus excluded or marginalized from development programs. Therefore today we find high instances of social tension and violence between people and communities. Such social divides are seen and experienced on the basis of caste, creed, religion, gender, and other identities. Cities are increasingly divided on the basis of such identity politics and their landscapes re-configured in the form of distinct colonies of ghettoized affluence and abject deprivation.

Such a state of selective recognition and mind-set of the ruling class and governments is also evident in matters relating to natural areas and environmental conditions. The case of Mumbai is probably an extreme example of abuse, misuse and destruction of the vast extent of natural areas that constitute nearly 50%, approximately 240sq.kms, of the total area of the city. Successive governments have consciously avoided mapping and documenting these areas. Being left out, these areas have been open to aggressive land filling, real estate development, rampant destruction of the mangroves, wetlands, rivers, creeks, hills and forests, largely by unscrupulous builders and developers. Governments too are active in proposing further construction in these areas. As a result, Mumbai, as many other cities, has been subject to frequent floods in extreme weather related events, resulting in huge loss of life and property. Yet

most governments are reluctant to recognize their importance, map these natural areas and legislate appropriate laws and policies for their protection, conservation and integration with the city's growth.

It is only after many citizens' movements in Mumbai demanding recognition of these natural areas and the environmental conditions, that the city government is documenting them for the first time in the forthcoming new development plan for the city. In fact, the first extensive mapping and comprehensive documentation of the natural areas of Mumbai along with a clearly spelt out action plan was carried out by this author along with the Mumbai Waterfronts Center. A public exhibition held by them titled 'Open Mumbai' exposed the lack of recognition of such vital assets and the rampant destruction of these areas, and importantly, suggested a way forward. The exhibition also influenced public opinion to a large extent, upon which the city authorities have turned their heads towards recognition of these eco-sensitive areas.

The growing level of intolerance arising from and incited by such selective and discriminatory recognition phenomenon is beginning to threaten the stability of cities. Levels of intolerance are leading to a state of aggression and violence, expressed in relationships between people at individual and collective levels; as well as between people, nature and the environment.

Recognition deficit is steadfastly eroding the very idea of cities, under which citizenship including the very right of existence of large numbers of people is being questioned. As a result, there is growing alienation of people with places, environment and the city. A constant state of denial of public interest in various aspects of life and environment by city authorities is alarming. In the case of Mumbai's slum dwellers, governments have devised a cut-off date policy for granting recognition to them for rehabilitation, protection from eviction, granting ration cards for purchase of ration at controlled prices, admitting their children to school etc. At present the cut-off date is the year 2000. People who live in slums or have houses built after the year 2000, are not recognized. Thus, citizenship is granted on selective, discriminatory and arbitrary terms.

Also, as a part of such a state of recognition deficit, governments perpetrate bluff regarding availability and just utilization of resources. Equity and equal rights of access of all citizens to the benefits of development is denied too. This political paradigm is steadfastly promoting an urban landscape that is ridden with social tensions and polarization of various communities. Necessary data is constantly manufactured to support this bluff and various policies and programs are engineered to benefit few with an idea of building exclusive cities. As a result, cities are being fragmented into disparate and often conflicting territories. We are constantly building boundaries that define territories with limited access, and with these come divisions and social hierarchies. In the case of Mumbai, close to seven million people constituting over 60% of the total population live in slums and pavements and other marginalized spaces, squeezed into just 8% of the city's land mass.

Unifying city fragments:

For me as an urban planner and architect, the pursuit to connect the disparate parts of our cities- people as well as landscapes - is truly my greatest challenge – fuelling my everyday work and engagements. I firmly believe that architecture and urban design are incredible democratic tools of socio-environmental change and therefore must not be reduced to being professions of service providers for the opposite reasons – service for those interests that are led by exploitative governments and the ruling class people against larger public interest.

Connecting people with urban planning and design exercises from the inception of preparing development programs is important. The implementation of city plans and programs with people's participation is a significant instrument for mobilizing larger political struggles for equality and justice. It is public action alone that can deeply influence decisions governments take. I therefore engage on a daily basis, committing substantial amount of time and resources, in projects relating to public spaces, conservation and integration of natural areas, slums redevelopment, availability of affordable housing for all and the formulation of people oriented policies.

Therefore, the key question before us is about the lack of recognition of certain people, lands and resources. This must form the basis of our protracted struggles for evolving strategies and plans for the unification of our fragmented and divided cities. We will be surprised if we begin to prepare lists of the various denials that we accept and pursue; or what we pretend not to see and recognize at individual and collective levels - of people as well as nature in their multitude of expressions. Such listing and its critical review would help in liberating ourselves and our movements, thereby strengthening our influence on governments for the achievement of much needed socio-environmental justice for now, and the future. May we therefore consider the value of our work, engagements and success be measured by the extent to which they contribute towards this goal of unifying the disparate city fragments.